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## Prologue

### Shining Star in the Dark

Looking away from the TV, back at the colouring, notepads and whatever else on the floor, everything faded into view. The room was silent as ever, an almost chilling ambience atypical of this kind of environment. From the darker shades, you'd never guess this was a care home. It's very expressive in its own way, you could say, since the empty attitude of the room reflects immediately off its host. Yasmin knelt down, with little expression at the scrawled notes and papers by her feet. Times like these, the world felt so empty, and the decorations of the room – or lack thereof – served only to taunt her loneliness as it crept up on her vulnerable mind.

Not that this was unusual, though. Yasmin was no ordinary teen. Or at least, that's what she claimed, hiding behind the noise of her speakers that may as well be a part of her structure. Picking up a scrap from the pile, she stood once again, slower than she came down. Her low mood was likened to an omen, a warning of the storms ahead. That was the first place her mind went when the alarm bells started ringing. Since a young age, she was always taught to make light of any bad situation, and those were words that resonated deeply within her. It signalled this feeling of solace within her, that she would always be okay and always feel human, attached to these little memories.

Her method was poetry, to ward away these dark omens and what they entail. It always made things easier to paint a mental picture of her inner battlefield, using the only weapon she'd ever really cared about to find a way through. It was only temporary, though. Wasn't she in this exact same situation yesterday? It doesn't really matter, every day is the same anyway. Lulled in her battlefield, she found herself whisked away, a sharp pain tore through her. No, that was just the wall; it's always been there. That must've been the point where she noticed how tired and aimless her mind was, since she stopped moving after realising somewhere along the way she was laying down now.

It was like being locked in, a metaphor she likes to use. She found herself staring at the ceiling for some time. The same patterns she picked up on and the constellations her mind desperately drew were repeating themselves again. She must've missed something in her mind, because she still felt restless, much more now than when she felt when she first laid herself down. A momentary idea hit, along with the rush of some kind of humanity she'd been waiting for. Just sneak out again, fresh air should do some good. It led to glimpses of the day before, how she has already been scolded enough for leaving, how it's unsafe to go through the window, all the usual spiels from before. Why do these things seem so distant now? This is practically a daily thing, and still she continues the façade of being someone worth all this help she gets. Her support worker, Jamie, does a lot, come to think of it. There's a lot to be thankful for, and here she's feeling nothing at all.

The emptiness seemed enough for her, as she promptly stood up, rushed to the window, calculating the ways to avoid detection. She was lucky to be in a far corner bedroom, where she wouldn't have to do much in the way of sight to leave undetected. She hung her legs

out the window, already mesmerised by the soothing breeze. She wasn't sure if she imagined it being soothing, or if it was actually calling her, but it wasn't the time to think about if she's lying to herself again. She knows where that gets her all too well, and this breeze is supposed to set her free of that, surely? On that note, she climbed out, hanging just by her hands to stop her momentum, then letting go altogether. She was barefoot, having hit the grass below which was a cold reminder. Given what could have happened, she took it as another sign to not be leaving, sending a single, pleading glance back at the window, before turning and being swallowed by the darkness.

Being swallowed by the darkness felt too normal, just walking ahead without the feeling of danger or fear she may have had a few years back. Maybe those memories don't mean so much after all? The place she was looking for was suddenly in sight. A small place with a low ceiling. No-one ever seems to come around here, maybe because it's in a corner of the town, blocked off by other similar sheds and all sorts of trinkets and debris. That was a good thing, though, because it gave Yasmin a quiet place to sit and contemplate. Maybe contemplate wasn't a good first word to come to mind, but it spoke volumes of her current mental state. It felt like some strange limbo, being surrounded by blackness and a certainly uncomfortable silence. She hopped up, using any energy she somehow still had, climbing onto the low ceiling. The place was empty, as she had hoped, but not completely, since there were still people talking somewhere. It eased her mind a little, since it can't be that late then.

Here, the air definitely helped her way in the battlefield; she could see more clearly now. The darkness seemed to escape her head, if very slowly, with each breath of the mostly clean air. It's not like the day she had was that bad. Not really bad at all. She didn't talk to people much, just stayed in her room, which she has always called her safe place. That should mean she should be happy, but it's never that easy. Still, she manages to lose herself in the day she did have, recollecting the interests she indulged in today. Those notes and papers weren't for nothing, were they? That was quite a portfolio and, looking back, she's gotten better at her poetry, her writing, found a lot of songs she likes and as is, she's still on good terms with everyone. That's all for a reason, isn't it?

"You question yourself an awful lot."

Just when she was embracing her newfound warmth, everything turned cold through an unknown voice directly behind her. Don't turn just yet, you'll show your fear. Was she really talking to herself out loud? She was about to ask, but the fear was coming out one way or another.

"...I was talking out loud? How much did you hear to know that?"

"Not a lot, but enough."

The reply was shot back before she could think, and upon turning around, the person she saw put her even more at unease. Not because she was a fearsome thug out for easy pickings, no, but because she *didn't* look like that. She arrived clean out of nowhere. Yasmin stood up, ready to leave until...

"No-one else is around."

She let the quote hang in the air, putting Yasmin even less at ease.

"Why are you?"

Yasmin was taken aback by this strange person's stranger question. But still, she didn't have to tell her anything, so what is there to be pressured by?

"That's... not really any of your business."

She turned around, ready to get down again, more able this time to predict the stranger's retort.

"What are you running from?"

Yasmin paused. That was a hard question, and now of all times, when she's stuck in this half asleep state. She waited for her to say something else, hopefully something easier to reply to.

"What's your name?"

"What's yours?"

She replied with a bit more assertion this time. What a thing to ask. This was starting to get a little creepy. At least if it was a thug she'd know to run.

"I am Starlet Phantasm. You?"

She looked again at the girl.

"No, really."

Starlet didn't drop her gaze, leading Yasmin's eyes to the ground. She wondered if she was offended. Saying what her name was wouldn't be a huge deal.

"Ah... I'm Yasmin."

She began to sit down. No real way out of this, but maybe this could distract her from the sleeping dilemma she's in.

"Is that all? You don't have a last name?"

She froze again. She did... kind of. That was too close to home to be a coincidence. Maybe best to leave now.

"I was actually just heading back, actually. Nice meeting you, I guess."

"Where are you headed?"

The girl's expression still didn't change, and she wasn't going to let this go.

"Home."

"Where is that? Home?"

Something about her voice, how monotone it was, made her very hard to read. But now it's getting really weird. Let that be the next warning to just stop and go home. Without second thought, she slipped off the low ceiling.

"I'm not the one asking a lot of questions, now."

She almost felt startled by her words, and started to walk a faster pace than normal, than her half-dead legs could handle.

"It doesn't help."

Yasmin stopped anyway. She simply didn't seem dangerous enough, or maybe her legs just couldn't anymore.

"When you beat yourself down so mercilessly."

"No..."

Yasmin looked down, pondering this.

"I know that. But you can't just stop."

"What expectations do you even have to live up to?"

"What is all this? Why are you trying to get in my mind like that?"

Starlet jumped off the low ceiling as well, almost immediately onto a bench, where she signalled Yasmin to sit next to her. She decided that if she sits down, she'd at least use this to find out more about Starlet as well.

"So... who actually are you?"

Starlet shook her head slowly. She looked almost sad.

"This is your story."

"Huh?"

Yasmin looked to the ground again. This lady is so strange. What is she getting at?

"You're an interesting person, Yasmin."

"Really? How?"

"You've been looking to your right this whole time. You want to leave, but you won't."

"Yeah. I'm just tired though, it's late isn't it?"

"You still came out here though. We both know you want someone to talk to. You're not fooling me and you're definitely not fooling yourself."

All of a sudden, Yasmin felt defeated. She didn't want to admit it, especially since she could guess it so quickly, but she was right.

“Well, I have Jamie for that. He’s my support worker, and there’s a whole bunch of staff who talk to me and I feel comfortable around them.”

Her face changed. Almost looked weird to see her wearing a sad smile.

“You’re lost.”

“And what gives you the right to say that?”

The assertiveness she was going for was trapped under a timid layer victim to how out of her depth she felt. Those feelings would again be realised in the cold remark Starlet would leave.

“You barely understand anything of this world. And here you’re spending your entire life hunting for answers you can’t handle, that you know you can’t handle. We’re surrounded by mysteries and chase our tails through insanity trying to find answers to them.”

*This* world? And what exactly is she talking about, getting so existential all of a sudden? But a thought came onto her mind, and her first interpretation of this new angle. Yasmin laughed a little.

“So you’re like some vigilante who gets existential with random people on the street?”

“I know this is a surreal scenario for you, but there was no way to avoid it. You barely have any presence on this world. There’s no place for you, and this world surely won’t be kind enough to just lend you one.”

Her glare became more cold and unfeeling, but it’s not like her face changed.

She looked down, breathing a sigh, then meeting Yasmin’s eyes once more.

“I was trying to make the change a bit less rigorous for you.”

She looked down. Again. By now, Yasmin felt the assertion rise back within her.

“I’m sorry.”

Yasmin’s guard was down. She didn’t even see it, nor did she see much of anything else before the once comforting darkness would swallow her again. Whatever was happening, it was accompanied by this subconscious prayer to wake up. It felt like those poetic expressions she worked so hard on were finally becoming real, her world rushing like a river then suddenly silence.

Absolute and sudden silence.

## Chapter 1

### The Dream Begins

That's just how life is isn't it? You can hope, and the world cruelly torches any hope it finds. It's what all of these metaphors, these poems, these feeble attempts to understand the world were hinting at, wasn't it? It was just too hard to admit. To have been aimlessly going into the dark, thinking there was any solace to be found in such a desolate place. All these thoughts felt too real, like some wave against her head. The impact put her sense of self in disarray, even more so when she felt such an impact against her eye. She instinctively touched her eye, then realising. Her world came to, all sounds, sensations, all flowing back. Even an unruly exchange in what must have been the next room but Yasmin didn't care. Humanity. She regretted using the wave metaphor so early, since that feeling of relief suited it much better, a tranquil feel that seeped through was a far superior way to use nature. Even if nature itself seemed cruel and callous.

Opening her once dismal eyes, a foreign room, with foreign inhabitants, foreign styles, it should have been disconcerting, maybe she just didn't care what happened from here on out. It just hit her, she must have been crying, she'd really given up for a moment. Maybe that encounter last night wasn't the only thing that wasn't human? She sat up, the room was empty, but with a décor not so easy to describe. The floors and walls were shades of grey, with blue tinges that seemed to give the place a level of light, alongside the fact that the lights here were really powerful...

Standing up, that rushing feeling hit, but must have retreated once her mind fought back. The dream must have been over. There was no other real way of describing it, but then noticing the unique location, she wondered again if her dream was truly over. She made it over to the door and, looking back, she was in some bedroom, about as bland as you can get. The sheets and bed completely white, with no desk or even so much as a window. Stepping through the door, she was immediately greeted with a familiar voice.

"You're up. I know this is probably overwhelming for you but please sit just there, I'll be with you in a half hour."

It was Starlet, pointing to a very long row of soft grey seats that curved around a corner of the room sharply. It was actually refreshing to see her again, and she sat down as instructed, without saying a word. There was another person here, hidden behind a dark-coloured mask. Only their eyes shone through with a piercing red glare. He was dressed in red-stained knight armour, but the eyes pierced a cold dagger through Yasmin. It didn't feel real, and yet it did all the same. This particular character lacked the convincing humanoid figure Starlet had, which made the whole situation that much more ominous. This room had apparatus in it as well as the chairs, which seemed to be experiment-type equipment. So she was some kind of a lab rat? Any solace she could find was a hoax so far, it was hard to keep herself convinced to continue. But still, she mustered the courage to ask.

"So, why am I here and where am I?"

She felt happy she asked, and the pair on the other side of the room looked back at her. The red knight looked to Starlet, who was the first to speak.

“We... aren’t supposed to tell you that yet. Just try to remain calm, please.”

The voice sounded so much more deceptive than last time, she knew there was much to be hidden, but what did it matter if she’d be victim to whatever they had planned anyway? She slumped her head down, covering two seats. She realised how uncomfortable it was, but lacked the energy to get back up.

“I’m telling you, this is the stupidest idea they’ve ever had.”

Starlet piped up, while it looked as if she and the knight were sorting boxes and packing equipment.

“Hm. It isn’t like you to talk bad against Ultranova like that.”

The knight’s voice was predictably deep, yet she couldn’t sense any malice.

“Yeah, but he’s never ordered us to do something so rash like this ever.”

“He ordered you, maybe.”

So there’s some Ultranova who leads these two? This runs deeper than expected, but then it’s really naïve to think being in this high-tech room would be the work of just two people. She kept her ears perked for anything incriminating, that might let her figure out her position and scenario.

“Come on, you realise this is a living, breathing human we’ve just taken? I’m just saying this can only go bad.”

Then she had to speak up! What has she gotten into and who are these people?

“Seriously, what the hell is going on?!”

“Yasmin, I told you, you’ll find out in due time, but not right now.”

“And yet here you are talking about it right in front of me.”

She could feel the aggression she threw out there, but it was like she wanted her to pursue this. She decided to take everything at face value for the time being and question as often as she is able. Starlet looked back at her, with no readable expression in her eyes as she then walked away into another room, leaving just Yasmin and the knight left in the room.

“Why do you think you’re here?”

The knight had asked. Was he just stalling or was it a genuine question?

“Well given how I was knocked out, I think, then woke in this strange new place with stranger guests, I can’t say I really know.”



The glare felt stronger, if only for a moment. Then he went back to packing, without a word. She slumped again into her seats, noticing she'd sat up in the excitement. It was probably excitement from finding a possible answer. Very quickly, her thoughts became idle, almost ready to fall back to sleep. She couldn't tell the time here, not without a clock or anything of the like. As far as dreams go, this didn't even feel that strange. It's real, that foreboding, nagging feeling on the back of her neck keeps reminding her, but the idea of protecting herself, preserving her own safety, it didn't sound so enticing as it should. Emptiness. There really wasn't anything more.

Yasmin was awoken to the same face from earlier. That one attachment to these surreal dreams she's having; the dream she's still having.

"Starlet?"

Her voice was weak, she must have slept for a time. It really must have been late, there's no way she got her 8 hours in this state. In her face, two aqua coloured eyes pierced through her. It was the first time properly seeing her close up. She was dressed differently now. It must have been red that she was wearing before, now replaced with a more docile blue and yellow kind of unique armour. It was just as surreal in proper light.

"If you're done resting, I'm ready to talk to you now."

Her voice was a strange comfort, something so familiar that never showed itself until what, yesterday? Maybe it was more that she had no idea where she was, and she was talkative so maybe it was her best chance at finding out what was going on. She promptly stood, following her out of this room and through a corridor. There were a lot of doors, many rooms to this place, but in spite of the lack of colour, there still felt more life here than places like the hospital she'd been to. It was supposed to be a scary situation, but, looking at Starlet, she wasn't wrong was she? She was afraid of everything once because she still didn't understand it, and history is repeating itself here. Still, she felt the need to start some kind of conversation and ease her mind.

"You do mean talking about where I am, don't you? Like, everything that's going on?"

She stopped at one door in a darker corner of this place, or at least it looked like a secluded corner. She unlocked it with traditional keys. Maybe she was expecting some high-tech identification. She turned the lights on and they went in.

"Sit."

Yasmin did as instructed, looking back at Starlet, who now towered over her.

"Sorry, this is all new to me. We've never done this before, but I'm sure you have questions, so I took the initiative of giving you a chance to ask anything and be debriefed on everything you should know before we hit our destination."

"Huh? Our destination? You mean we're moving right now?"

Starlet smiled. Looks like she was going to enjoy this whole surprising her after every little thing she says.

"Yes, and at very high speed too. Your body adapted to it as you slept, and we were sure the defences we provided against the limitations of a human would be enough for you to, well, live."

"What is this whole 'human' thing? Can you explain that before anything else, please?"

She sat on a desk opposite, looking thoughtful about something. Yasmin was convinced she was to come out with something either crazy, deceptive or both.

“Well...”

Yasmin looked more demanding now. Was she actually unsure?

“It is true that I’m a human, but not purely so.”

“No?”

“Outside this world, you don’t just get the Earth you’re used to. More or less.”

She said that last part quietly, almost with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

“The universe is filled with parallels, paradoxes of existence and mysteries far beyond you and I.”

“So are you human or not?”

Starlet gave a slight glare, then went back to her thoughtful mode. After a pause, she spoke bluntly.

“I’m not.”

Her glare forced down Yasmin’s defences, as if pleading for her not to question it any further.

“I am a wielder of ‘Septilet’s Arcanum’. Of course, you don’t know what that is, because Earth is completely free of its influence. So, because you don’t get it, I suppose you’d call this...”

She took a blue ribbon out of her hair. It was tiny, so she didn’t even see it, then noticed the three ribbons coloured blue, green and red respectively in her pocket. She placed her red ribbon in that same area her blue one was, and some flash of light covered Yasmin’s vision completely, then followed by complete shock as Starlet appeared before her with the same red clothing she wore the night they first met.

“Magic.”

Yasmin was lost for words, Starlet may have been expecting that to answer her questions but now a wave of new ones flooded in, they covered her mind completely, blocked any sound for escaping her open mouth. Starlet simply responded with a sigh, standing up once more.

“I knew you’d act like that, it’s exactly why I didn’t want to do this, but you didn’t believe me, even though I already tried to open your mind earlier and the other day.”

Yasmin composed herself, the words rehearsed in her mind slowly articulated, hopefully into something intelligible.

“Does that mean... you had it out for me to do this the whole time? Okay... so you know some magic I’ve never heard of, but what is this that you’re bringing me into it for?”

“You don’t have a past or a life to go back to. It wasn’t all that high priority if you were willing or not, but I was just following the orders I was given.”

She looked back at Starlet, who seemed emotionless, still as stable as ever.

“You mean I’m being abducted? And I’m not going to return?”

“You aren’t listening to me. You don’t have anything to return to. The world you just left was your past, and you know as well as I do of the insanity you saw yourself drifting into. You have next to no understanding of that place, similar to how you have next to no understanding here. Even those people you brought up. Do you not think they’d have given up on you by this point?”

Yasmin covered her ears, looking down by her feet, trying to breathe. This wasn’t a dream, was it? It felt like her ‘former’ life, as she feels it’s necessary to call it, was a dream instead. Was it such a bad thing? She’d leave Jamie, who surely didn’t give up on her and what about the rest of the staff and the friends she had there. They weren’t close, but it was something, surely? Why wasn’t the list of things to go back to longer?

“I don’t know. I just don’t.”

“I can’t make it any more clear for you; only you can do that. You’re being transported to another world. My world, where you will be looked after as an important guest.”

“But why?”

Yasmin looked back up at her, holding back tears again.

“The one who ordered me to do this didn’t tell me why. He only reassured your safety and that your safety is to be kept in high regard. I’m not happy with this plan, but there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“You mean Ultranova?”

Starlet looked surprised, if only for a second, and then looked away.

“Yes. Him. Listen, our destination is in about half an hour, so we don’t exactly have a lot of time. I need to go over with you what to expect.”

With a small gulp, Yasmin looked into Starlet’s eyes and nodded.

“We have a few defensive divisions which help us carry out order across our world, and a girl who works there insisted she wanted to sow you around. She’s been really eager to see you and she really is friendly, so I’d advice being polite to her so you at least have one person to fall back on. The division in question is White Jinx, which I’d say is probably your best bet anyway. You’ll sleep and live there for the time being. I know you’ll likely live and prosper, but—”

She knelt down to Yasmin’s height and looked directly at her.

“To do so, you’ll need to let go of your inhibitions.”

It was as if she predicted the puzzled look on Yasmin’s face.

“Yep, I could tell from a mile away; you’re terrified. And you don’t believe me at all, do you?”

“I do.”

Yasmin spoke quietly, essentially defeated by everything she says.

“You will in time. Don’t let yourself be defeated before the battle even begins.”

It brought her mind straight back to the battlefield metaphor from the other day. Before she could articulate, however...

“Come, Yasmin. We’ll be disembarking soon.”

Her head perked up.

“I thought we had half an hour? Does time go faster here too?”

Starlet laughed. It brought a smile to Yasmin’s face immediately, even if it was probably at her expense. That was the most emotion she’s shown after all.

“Don’t worry, time is flowing just as it always did for you. I want to be early, so you can prepare yourself.”

She followed after hearing this, walking through the same corridors as before and a number of new areas. Most of them were spotless, save for some lights, switches. This place didn’t feel that different from Earth after all. They’re using remarkably similar technology for a society that has this new energy at their disposal, Yasmin thought.

“We’re near enough finished sorting out storage. This used to be a palanquin, owned by Ultranova and a number of associates.”

“Like you?”

“I wasn’t a staff member at the time. He found a new place to live, more homebound than this. This is essentially used to carry large loads long distances now. We’re doing some shipping at the same time, but this particular trip was high stakes.”

“And what was that energy? Can you actually perform magic, then, which you can use to change your clothes?”

She smiled this time, but didn’t look at her and continued walking.

“That’s not all it does, each piece is equipped with the right energy for the job, each colour-coded to attack, defence and speed respectively. It’s pretty simple, but it helps me get all sorts done. It’s all carried in this enchanted objects, she pointed to the red ribbon in her hair.”

Yasmin couldn’t find the words. It all felt so surreal, even now.

“What happens if you lose one?”

"I just have a sorcerer make a new one. I have someone specialised in making this for me. It was my idea to take this route in my magic wielding, and there was somebody willing to do all that."

The pair entered a room with a very large door, encrusted in all sorts of jewels. It was criminally overkill, it'd happily function as a disco ball with the right light. But that aside, it mesmerised Yasmin, with a beckoning sequence of colour.

"This is the exit, as you may have guessed."

"This kind of decoration is used just for the exit?"

"Well, yes. You don't use this kind of economically draining equipment on a janitor's closet."

She leaned down to Yasmin's ear in a whisper:

"And if I had it my way, we wouldn't be using it at all."

She fell silent, however, as a dark grey figure entered her field of vision.

"I don't know if I told you this yet, or if you figured it out yet but not everyone here is human, or not as 'human' as me, at least."

She said this pointing to a polygonal figure. It had very sharp-looking ears and, on closer inspection, it looked like they were electrified in some way. They turned around, revealing two beady white eyes and the lack of anything else of a face. The only other characteristic trait she noticed was a violent pearly white spike attached to both knees. The creature noticed them and approached, whereas Yasmin took a slight step back, trying to hide nervousness.

"This is a Plasmiron, which is a kind of creature I'm at least 99% sure you don't know about."

She looked quizzically at Yasmin, as if waiting for clarification. She shook her head in response.

"They are electronically built organisms, who come complete with weapons and gadgets."

"I think I know what I am."

The creature suddenly spoke, with a strangely human voice.

"Our voices are emulated to mimic humans. But right now I have a few more things to unpack, if you'll excuse me."

The Plasmiron walked away, hurriedly, to which end Starlet decided to pipe up.

"There's a lot of new animals or creatures here that you probably don't know about, so keep your guard up for that. Alongside that, there are a lot of human-like creatures too, who are personified forms of other animals that you may or may not already know."

Personified forms of other humans?

"You might not have guessed it yet, but I'm actually one of these, but not to a creature that you know."

"Wait do you mean hybrids of humans with cats or dogs or whatever else?"

"Precisely. It's more or less unknown why you have cats but we have... should I call them half cats?"

"I don't know about that..."

"Either way, Septilet's Arcanum surely has a bewildering effect on all life it touches."

Yasmin looked down, thoughtfully. She wasn't sure what this Arcanum was supposed to be, but that made it sound more dangerous than anything else.

"What is this Arcanum thing you're talking about and does that mean it's going to have an effect on me?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know. The origins about the star that fell here are very vague, and I've concluded myself that it's better that way."

"I don't know, it sounds really shady."

Yasmin looked at the floor again, and as she did, a loud crack occurred, continuing through the room. The door was opening very slowly, as if trying to milk all the tension it can. Yasmin felt her face flush.

"This is it? So soon?"

"Don't let yourself give in now. Autumn should be on the outside, ready to take you back to where you'll be staying. I'll walk you to her, but that'll be all from me. All that aside, welcome to Oneiria"

She looked to the door, which had just finished moving. Yasmin looked outside. It looked normal enough, with a number of various faces looking back in. Many of them had ears like a cat or a dog, or looked ghostly white, or very tall and imposing or very small and somehow equally imposing. A crowd had never been so diverse.

Starlet started walking first, and hopped off the ledge the opening created. It was a good 6 or so feet, but Yasmin followed, and thus took her first steps on the ground of Oneiria. Oneiria. That sounded like the word for dreams, which she'd learned about following a look into language to further her poem prowess.

She was about to ask where the person in question was, until Starlet was grabbed by a girl wearing green. She immediately spoke, with a soft but playful voice.

"You're back! I've been waiting for hours!"

Starlet took a step back, and the girl's hands off her sides.

"I said I'd be here at 5pm or earlier and we're running early. How can you have been here for hours expecting me to show up?"

The girl looked to the ground, with her hands modestly behind her back.

"Probably because you said 'or earlier'."

She said this, pouting, to which Starlet smiled.

"Well, she's here now, yes?"

The girl's eyes darted to Yasmin, as did her body, as she ran to hold her in embrace, nuzzling her head under Yasmin's. She could hear her muffled giggles and feel her excitement course through her.

"What did we just talk about?"

She looked back to Starlet and released, pouting at the ground again.

"No physical contact..."

"Well, anyways, yes, this is Yasmin, the human who traversed to our world."

The girl's enthusiastic smile, along with the tail that swayed almost like a dog's, she could practically read her already.

"And this is Autumn Wist, who works at White Jinx like I told you about."

Her name felt all too appropriate, matching the flare from her orange hair (or fur) and the natural looking craftsmanship of the green dress she wore.

Yasmin took out her hand, remembering Starlet's words about being polite and carrying her own sense of humanity to this world. Autumn looked quizzically at her, then at Starlet, who decided to chime in.

"A handshake is fine."

Upon hearing that, she shook hands, somehow putting too much emphasis there as well.

"So you're going to take her back to White Jinx now, Autumn?"

"White Jinx, got it."

Starlet tilted her head.

"You know, the place where you live and work and everything."

"Yeah I know."

She said this examining a daisy on the ground, going low enough to smell it.

"Do you, though?"

"Yeah!"



She jumped up, feigning a sophisticated look with her hands firmly by her sides and a pleading smile that pulled any integrity apart.

Starlet turned around, jumping almost effortlessly the 6 feet back onto the palanquin and walking straight in, much to the dismay of Autumn's wave, which was never reflected and left in the wind. Autumn turned to Yasmin with expectant eyes that wore her down.

"So you're taking me back then?"

"Yeah. Sorry, it's just my first time seeing a human."

As she began to walk, Yasmin faltered, confused.

"You are still pretty much a human, though. You just have the ears and a tail is all. I don't really get this whole 'human' thing."

Autumn shook her head, signalling her to walk and talk.

"It isn't that simple, though."

"Why not?"

She looked defeated, down at the floor.

"I don't know, it just isn't. But some of the higher ups say the humans are supposed to be pure, and that we aren't completely pure ourselves."

"What does that mean though? Earth wasn't exactly a pure place. It was sorta the opposite."

"I don't know. It sounded like a heaven to me for a time, but I can't honestly say I know what the whole human thing is about either. I think... it has something to do with magic patterns or something. The energy you release is pure or something."

"That doesn't really make any sense."

"I didn't think it would. That's why I try not to worry about it."

"I wouldn't mind questioning things to try and understand them."

"I don't like doing that, because there's always more to find, so I'll never be happy with how much I know, and I think it'd be better I focus my time on doing something happy."

"Hey, you're smarter than you look."

Yasmin smiled, as did Autumn, who tilted her head in her direction slightly, but jolted upon some realisation.

"Hey wait! I thought I looked smart too. Julie lied to me again..."

She pouted at the ground a third time.

"Who's Julie?"

“Someone from the group, so you’ll meet her soon. She’s nice, just a bit excitable, you know?”

“Yikes, coming from you, that must be excitable.”

“I was excited, you don’t get it.”

The conversation fell silent, leading Yasmin to look around. There were many others with ears and other additional appendages. There weren’t any Plasmirons around, though, but a number of strange magical-like creatures could be seen. So this is home, now? It’s not too different, grass still rampant across great fields, alongside huts, mounds that people call home. That little shed she’d sit on at night back at home wasn’t any better than the expression found here. She wasn’t sure if it was the impressive saturation in the nature all around her, or the equally saturated hue of the diverse cast of creatures who lived relatively in harmony. At least, the same amount as back at Earth. That way, it makes sense how Autumn would end up like this.

“This world is...”

Autumn looked expectantly into her eyes as they walked. Even her cat ears perked up along with her tail.

“Beautiful.”

She exchanged a smile, with a blush in her cheeks as she turned to the path ahead.

“Isn’t it just?”

“Um, so are there any rules or things I should know about living wherever it is I’m going?”

“Maybe, but I’m not really sure what life was like for you back there. I guess be nice to everyone. We get a dorm together there, so we have a bed each, and you can leave your things in there if you like.”

“I’m sure I can work with that.”

“Oh!”

She felt her jump, looking to see Autumn with contracted pupils.

“I need to introduce you to everyone, don’t I?”

How many people are there, again? With someone like Autumn, there’d likely be no end to the pleasantries.

“The place is just there. You don’t need an ID to get in but some rooms are off-limits.”

The building was white, as the name of it would have suggested, about three floors high. It was surely an impressive building, with a sense of formality in its lack of colour, but a sense of life if the inhabitants she could see outside it. As they approached, Yasmin felt the eyes of many on her, with dispositions not so easy to read.

“So, do people actually know I’m a human?”

Autumn also noticed the glances, sending out a usual smile as reassurance, to which most people looked away and back at what they were doing.

“Most people should already. I guess some people are a bit curious about that kind of thing.”

“Curiosity kills the cat, am I right?”

“Don’t say that.”

She remembered the ears, and wondered if it was an insensitive thing to say, but it left her mind anyway once they entered through the main door, made of glass which led to a kind of reception, complete with a few scattered chairs and a large desk of which nobody was at. Already, she could see a few faces. One black-haired boy about their age sat alone on a bench. He wore an azure cloak among much more darkly coloured garments, his glance avoiding theirs. Yasmin’s glance was broken as she was poked, turning to see a pointing Autumn, at some stairs with a sign that read “Authorised Personnel Only”.

“That’s where staff members go. They sleep up there and I’m pretty sure they carry out a lot of their work there. A lot of them don’t come down at all.”

“Have you ever been up there?”

“Only once, I was helping Julie with something, but nobody knows about that so don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Sounds pretty easy to sneak up there though.”

Autumn responded with a slight giggle, paired with a sly grin.

“Hm, I guess curiosity kills the human instead?”

“Hey, I thought you said you didn’t like that?”

“It’s okay so long as it’s not a cat!”

Yasmin looked at her, almost surprised at her words, but ultimately settled with a smile. She noticed herself settling in faster than she expected. It was an awkward middle ground between which world was a dream, and by this point, it felt like this could go on a while, but she decided at some point down the line not to think about it until now.

The pair walked through a hallway that followed the entrance. The next room had a number of desks, tables and the like, but those inside it made the room’s formality harder to believe. Half of them stood to greet them, most likely Yasmin as a new guest they haven’t seen before. Autumn was the one to speak first.

“This is her! The human!”

The eyes of most of the room lit up, as did the atmosphere, and a few approached. The first was a figure with rabbit ears. She wore a red and white shirt and jacket combo, which

brought out her pinkish eyes. Her voice was harsher, an odd combo of playful demeanour alongside a serious-sounding voice.

“Hi. I’m Julie, kind of a staff member here.”

Another girl in pink and yellow with pastel pink hair gave a smirk, which Julie sensed from behind.’]”

“And that’s Luminby. She’s staff as well, I guess, but she doesn’t actually manage anything.”

The pair exchanged looks of callousness as Julie smugly walked off into the earlier hallway.

“Don’t worry, I get it.”

Upon that reply, Luminby threw back a glance detached from Yasmin’s amiable smile, quickly hidden as she turned around and back to the desk she was presumably at beforehand. Autumn cleared her throat quietly, an indication that directly pointed at the uncomfortableness of the situation.

“Maybe we should move along?”

Sensing something was amiss, Yasmin agreed, idling behind her as they entered another few rooms. A kitchen, what looked like a game room, a few more desks. Seemed somewhere torn between a workplace and living quarters. It’d make sense, since Autumn indicated people did actually live here. They stopped in a bigger room, complete with a stage complete with various apparatus. It looked to be out of order from the low light, but the spaciousness was surely something imposing to behold.

In the centre was a ring, bounded by chains and equipment that belonged in a dingy underground hideout. The colours themselves spoke a language of discontent, like the very size of the room was warning everyone in it, without time for discretion. Autumn’s warm smile shone through it nonetheless.

“This is the official fighting ring.”

“Wait a minute, I’m confused. Why would you have something like that here?”

“Did I forget to mention, each of the divisions of Oneiria have a competitive side. When you have so much unique fighting styles and everyone competing for dominance, I guess this is the best way to settle it.”

“I don’t know, I guess it wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“You could say it’s for more rigorous training. Hence why Julie and a few others are the main ones who use it. We do have a lot of other rooms for sparring which are more, well, me-friendly.”

She said that last part with a forced smile, then nudging Yasmin when she backs away slightly. Before Yasmin could ask, she ran out the room, as if trying violently to steal her

hand away. They ran through some familiar rooms and then finally into a gym with a soft white floor. The room was filled with the sound of soft hits and the occasional light from what Yasmin can only assume to be some kind of magic. Immediately in front was a boy with blue hair about her age against some robotic suit. The suit looked incredibly technological, there must have been at least three secret weapons on it from face value; it looked very much an unreliable piece of equipment.

The blue haired boy stopped upon seeing the pair spectating. Once he got his breath back, he looked to Autumn, expectantly, who then nodded.

"Yep, it's her. This is Gamma and he..."

She looks around, maybe she lost her train of thought.

"I'm a White Spadetail."

Yasmin looked down, behind him.

"No, I don't have a tail, at least, not in the literal sense."

Yasmin looked up again, curious but also slightly embarrassed, at least until she remembered how it looked like he was losing.

"I don't blame you for that. That suit looks a little unfair to me."

She said it with a slight giggle, in the hopes of coming off as courteous. Whatever hope in that was crushed when she jolted as the head of the suit came off, revealing someone was inside it. He looked at her.

"To be fair, I wasn't using any of my weapons."

"Lempira, I'm gonna need 5 minutes."

"Same. And it's getting late, so maybe show her her bedroom now? I don't suppose tomorrow would be your first official day here, so there's bound to be a lot to do."

"I suppose."

Autumn took Yasmin with her back into the room with the ring, where there were some stairs also leading to the next floor.

"These ones, we can take. This is where all the guest rooms and whatnot are."

Yasmin followed her up the stairs, which led to a set of doors. Each were numbered, with Autumn leading her to the door on the far right with a '9' on it.

"This is our room now."

She said this taking out keys, which presumably had been given for each room separately. She fumbled, predictably, before getting the door open, revealing a small room with two small, white beds on both sides of the room. The one on the right, opposite a small window, had a few plush dolls on it, mainly felines.

"I'm guessing that one's yours?"

"Yu-huh! How did you guess?"

"Lucky guess."

Yasmin smirked slightly, gently sitting on the edge of her bed. It was very comfortable, almost too soft. She wondered if this would prove too soft even for sleeping, since her hand was almost swallowed whole upon prodding the duvet. Autumn slumped into her bed, face-first into her plush dolls. Yasmin looked up, noticing the strange new light. What powers it? Surely not electricity, but probably some kind of magic. Her train of thought was lost when the light, like her, was enveloped in black. It must have been now everything came back to her. She was asleep next to some cat-girl in a new world. It must be a dream of some kind, but she knew it wasn't.

"Autumn?"

After a few seconds, she heard a questioning hum.

"Do you ever get those dreams that feel so real you feel like you've lost contact with reality?"

There was another pause.

"If I were to wake up, and I couldn't use fire anymore, or if everyone around me was completely different, I'd probably end up hiding in a ditch like a hermit."

She giggled, but there was an obvious darkness in that compared to her usual, cheery self.

"Being a hermit doesn't sound like a life for you."

"You'd be surprised."

"By what?"

"How fast a change of scenery can change someone. See, I like to think I'm happy and fun because everything around me is too. I guess I want you to see it the way I do. I know this place is great, but I can't imagine how scary it must be at first."

Yasmin smiled to herself. It made her feel strangely warm knowing Autumn wasn't as naïve as she acted, and that she knew her situation so well.

"You do understand, then. It kind of goes against everything I believe in. I'm pretty sure Starlet wanted the change to not feel so... jarring. You can't really avoid that though."

"I don't actually know Starlet that well."

"I just don't know what is in store for me in this world, I guess. I still feel like at some point I'll wake up and return home."

"Yasmin."

There was a pause and she continued, so she must have assumed she was listening.

"I don't wanna scare you, but... you're staying here."

"So you say, figment of my imagination."

"I'm serious."

"I know, I know."

She let out a long sigh, turning to the wall. She could feel Autumn's emerald eyes against the back of her head and after a number of minutes, the pressure had alleviated. She turned back around, deflating slightly to see a glint of emerald reflecting back.

"I'm not in the mood to talk right now, I'm sorry. See you in the morning."

She still felt her gaze, this time trying to shut it out.

"Do you have any memories?"

She opened her eyes slightly.

"Yeah."

"Okay. I won't bother you anymore, don't worry. Good night."

The 'good night' was as sweetly delivered as usual but with that tagged on doubt. She only wanted to help, didn't she? Yasmin gave no reply, hoping to end the conversation there. It was surely a lot to digest, so she shouldn't be blamed for not taking it so well every so often.

Staying here. Forever. Why wasn't that feeling dragged down by the qualms that latched onto everything she thought? It seems a nice place, but something was amiss. There's always going to be something. Is this what'll happen from here on out? Ride out the dream, maybe one day magically wake up? It was becoming more and more apparent she wouldn't wake up. Memories, then. There weren't as many as she might have hoped, that she might have been able to build on. This is the happiest she's been in a while. The most life she's experienced in months. Even before being taken in, life on the streets... it really was the 'nothing' life Starlet described. It felt like an elaborate and supernatural lesson put in place by fate itself.

About an hour passed after Yasmin turned back to Autumn's direction, having finally concluded sleep was going to be impossible. The idea of those lost memories haunted, seizing every moment Yasmin was without her guard. Those are all the past. Maybe this is fate's way again?

She stood, slowly, pivoting back to Autumn upon every noise, until she left the room. She was out like a light. Hardly surprising; that energy would defeat anyone. The lights were off outside the room back in the hallway, with the faint voices below pressing her forward. The relief that the place wasn't silent just yet was stronger than expected.

Down the stairs, the ring room was empty, except for the faint industrial noises as the back, clouded by the darkness of the room. Upon each loud bang, Yasmin's steps grew ever-shorter until the point she exited through the door that lead to the sparring room. There were no voices in this direction, and combined with the dark emptiness around her, she felt that stoic urge to press onward and tune out her surroundings take over. Opening the door, she was greeted to another empty room, but the darkness was chained back by a soft red light. Continuing through rooms, she found herself outside. There was another exit, which may have defeated the point of the ID process. The breeze pierced through, striking a particular cold that warned Yasmin back. She figured it was in her mind, then examining closer at the shadowy figure under a nearby tree.

Approaching, she saw the pink-haired girl from earlier. With the relief once again washing over the built-up doubts, she decided to make the first move.

"What did you say your name was?"

She looked back, calmly. Her eyes darted down to the grass once more, to which Yasmin really felt the cold from the breeze that time.

"Lumi."

"You kinda left me hanging earlier. Something up?"

This felt like a sudden shift, almost to a reckless extent. The person still felt foreboding, even if the damp musk of the dark was more likely to cause her discomfort.

"I'm fine."

She sat down by Lumi's side, to which she faced her with a surprisingly intimidating gaze.

"I'm more concerned about you."

"Don't worry about me. I'm just getting by as things happen. It's not that bad."

"Well..."

She looked away, twiddling her thumbs along a discreet sigh, before looking back once again.

"You didn't bring anything with you? Not a single memory, an heirloom, anything?"

"No, I've been over this with Autumn actually. It's fine, really. My life was pretty boring anyway, I guess. I think whatever goes on here is much more interesting, anyway."

"Life is good here, but only because I built myself up."

She shuffled a couple inches back, moving her legs to face Yasmin.

"Before this, my life was pretty shit, actually."

She said so with a slight, amiable laugh in her voice.

"But look."



She held up a small locket. It was metal, but whatever one was out of the question, given its imprinted rust of all colours. Inside was no picture, nothing possible to make out.

“This was something I picked up a long time ago, and it marks my proficiency as a survivalist.”

“How so?”

“Well, I picked this up a long time ago, back before I ever knew about this group and fended for myself. I also have a diary of sorts, which documents my excursions from the last decade or so. It’s in my room somewhere. In the forbidden area of the building, that is.”

She must have tagged that on, sensing Yasmin’s curiosity. A diary didn’t seem such a bad idea now, to keep track of things from here on out.

“What kind of things did you write about?”

“Anything that came to mind. My most memorable moments down to the most trivial rivalries.”

“All in one diary?”

“I have very small writing. It’s more like 7 diaries, but still, they’re all bound closely together, continuations of one another. I quite like writing, see?”

“Yeah. Yeah! So do I! Are you saying I should do something like that?”

She hummed a very slight laugh, turning to her once again and moving her legs flat on the floor below.

“It was more me reminiscing, but in your case, I’d say you should.”

Yasmin smiled, more so internally this time at the feeling of making a friend who felt similar in wavelength. The excitement softened the guards in her mind.

“I’ll get you a spare book from my room, wait just there.”

She eased back down into the ground again as she watched her leave. The anticipation saw her shifting her legs and arms cyclically every minute roughly. This was already something that felt unique to Earth, but in a way that still felt human, even if these people claimed not to be. The place was pretty rundown, now that she thought of it. About three quarters of her day would be in her room, and the times of happiness she’d shared with Autumn or with Starlet, maybe they were just so comparatively? From a distance, she saw Earth through a dismal light. It wasn’t to last though, surely? The dream idea would never truly go away. Oneiria seemed more like a sick joke now, like a constant reminder of the dream always out of her reach. But here she was living it, living where she never knew she wanted, or could, or that she never knew could even exist.

It was as if she was swirling into depth, suddenly dragged up to the surface by Lumi’s voice among the ruffle of paper.

“Here, it should be enough to last you.”

She held the book, about a couple hundred pages in length. This didn't feel so compact as she may have hoped but still, she looked at the pages in the barely visible light.

"Come here."

Lumi said through the door she found her way through. The light wasn't just red anymore, more friendly and beckoning. She followed her in, then sitting down to the table with her book and the pen.

"So I'll write an entry now, then turn in for the night."

"Yeah go for it."

Lumi's voice came from just outside the other door.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna sleep now. Good night Yasmin."

"Night."

She sat down to her open book once more. For a moment, the array of blank lines taunted, then immediately swept aside as the words formed in her head. She glided through the day through her new pen, where she offloaded surplus emotion where possible.

Before long, a full page was done and her thoughts came to an immediate and convenient halt. Holding the book with full support in one arm, she walked the maze back to her bed, trying, albeit not as hard as last time, to be silent around the sleeping cat. Even her sleeping sounded faintly like a purr, accompanied by her naïve slight smile in her sleep. She placed the book under her bed, before covering herself and drifting away. She fell a lot faster than expected, such that the momentary elation alone carried her into the next day. It was the first night further from home than she'd ever been and further than she'd likely ever be again. But that aside, the distance felt the same, if not shorter in her mind. The present is now and right now, this is home.

*I'm pretty sure I'm still in a dream, but still one better than what I should expect if I ever wake up. I don't know how it happened, I don't know why it happened, but I don't care. It's quickly turning out that meeting Starlet was one of the best things I'd ever done. She set me straight, or if not, this world did. It's unnatural, but all too eye-opening all the same. The ship she took me on and this new world doesn't feel that far from home. Every so often I feel like something is about to go wrong, and I'm worried I'm not going to be able to scratch this feeling, but I had another thought too. After talking to Autumn and then making a new friend, I've been doing things that I've never done, or at least not so well, and things I could theoretically have done back on Earth. I figure if I document this, I have true memories to look back on. Maybe even on where life really began.*

*I don't know how to describe any of this, it feels like my mind is trying to latch onto everything at once and it can't. But my thought was that I've already lived more here than I usually would back at home. On that strange note, I feel like even if something were to go seriously wrong, if they were all to kill me and put me and my mind finally to rest, I don't*

*know if I'd care all that much, and not just because I'd be dead but because I don't really have any regrets. The edge that tore me open was enough pain for a lifetime, anyway. I deserve this, don't I? I should seriously get some sleep about now, whatever happens, it happens. And it all does for a reason. Good night.*

## Chapter 2

### The Many Sides of Oneiria Reveal Themselves

The light woke Yasmin up, tearing through the curtains. They were easily too thin to block any kind of light. She avoided the window's adamant gaze, to notice Autumn wasn't there. There wasn't a clock in here, or any other way this world is supposed to tell time. She stood, battling her head rush which hit with impact.

No-one was in the hallway just outside her bedroom either, but the nearby voices pressed her forward once more. The ring room was still empty, such that her attention was brought to the sparring room immediately through hearing the sound of impacts nearby. Her timing going through the door was perfect, just as the rabbit girl from yesterday was knocked into the wall with inhuman impact. The perpetrator a tall suit of armour. The only way of telling it was a humanoid inside being the large eyes inside. That answers why the walls are padded as well. Julie took one glance at Yasmin before entering the fray to land a surprisingly powerful blow, knocking the towering pile of armour back a step. It then sent a sickeningly powerful-looking blow to the ground of which she stood. What happened next was obstructed by light and the violent sound of thunder, to which gave way to Julie standing triumphantly in front of the fallen pile of armour.

"You need something?"

"Yeah I was wondering where Autumn was?"

"At the reception. Something about a threat from somewhere to this place."

"Okay, thanks."

She turned around, holding her hand out in some lazy dismissal. Yasmin rushed out, headed for the entrance. The other rooms were relatively scarce on her way there, to which she was greeted with a small crowd of familiar and unfamiliar members. Lumi was holding a letter.

"What's going on?"

"It's nothing."

Lumi replied, with nonchalance all over. Some of the others looked worked-up, excited. Even afraid.

"What's that you're holding?"

"It doesn't really concern you, so don't worry. Did you use the book I gave you?"

Autumn chimed in before Yasmin could answer.

"Well, it *is* about her."

Lumi gave her a cold look, before turning to Yasmin again. Lempira gave in and explained what was presumably on Lumi's mind. He was still wearing the suit from yesterday, but this time his helmet stayed on.

"A competitor of ours has decided to give us trouble after finding out we have a human here."

"Calling them competitors is giving them too much credit."

Lumi added. They looked to Yasmin expectantly, like they wanted her take on it.

"This human business is really weird. You make it sound like smuggling. I don't *want* to be this rumoured human."

Lumi and Lempira look at each other questioningly, then back at Yasmin. Lempira sighed, then spoke up excuses.

"They shouldn't have found out. The only way they could is if someone who knew told them."

They looked at each other once more, this time through more narrowed eyes, then back at everyone else. Autumn smiled, sensing a hostility rising.

"You guys don't really think one of us told them, do you? None of us even have anything to gain from that."

She felt triumph as the hostility in her mind shallowed. Yasmin felt the need to still ask.

"So, what happens now?"

Lumi shrugged, starting to move out of the room.

"Nothing much. It's not like they threatened anything, so if we just ignore him this should just blow over like usual."

"Don't speak too soon."

A man about in his early twenties stood confidently facing them. The dark red of his cloak matched with his eyes and tall stature, alongside the strange blade attached to the side of his waist gave the impression more of a supervillain than a fellow member. Maybe he was? He hadn't shown up here until now. He was holding the letter, with eyes on Lumi.

"Naltine."

She bowed, and was that a stutter that Yasmin heard? The man, whose name must have been Naltine, stepped forward, handing her the letter.

"Look at the way it's written."

"I did, it's a threat to come over here and wreck the place."

"Not so! The note never said that directly."

"So what are you suggesting?"

Yasmin took the initiative to snatch the letter.

"Yasmin!"

“Well if I’m responsible for whatever is gonna happen I wanna know why!”

The handwriting was elegant, neat, it acted formal enough. She mentally noted the indirectness of the letter, using hints to create a level of mystery. Maybe thinking of it this way made it sound more like a poem. Gamma must’ve entered at some point, since beyond the letter she heard him speak up.

“They’re clearly planning something, they’re loaded with something.”

“Well, when did they find out?”

Yasmin examined the letter harder, hoping to be the one to shed more light on this mystery. The letter looked mostly superficial, like the kind of threats and language typical of the immature. The last line broke this pattern: ‘May the girl’s mind and spirit be put to rest, before she has anything true to regret’. The line felt familiar, almost piercing in contrast to the rest of the bitterly-worded letter.

Upon realising, her heart skipped a beat, froze another beat and dropped the letter for Lumi to quickly catch.

“Yasmin, did you find something?”

She pulled her halfway out of her trance, trying still to collect her thoughts.

“Would you excuse me for a minute?”

She rushed through the rest of the building back to her room. As little people were around as usual, and no-one questioned her rushing.

Upon reaching her room, she grabbed the diary. It was just as she left it. It’d be too easy to forget to put it back. She opened it up to the first page, where she’d written her first log entry. The text was all the same, save for a new verse added below hers, done in red writing:

*I know your pain. I too am a creature of nothing, I see a future where we will be reunited, a future where I can guide you to the path we all fell from.*

Yasmin felt the cold shiver from head to toe, a knot in her stomach that controlled her. She looked around the room, that false feeling of trust was broken just like that. Someone did that, and what was this cryptic nonsense? Some cruel joke? Something even worse? She felt at a dead end, blocked by concrete. Still, she pressed forward, heading back down to the reception in the futile and desperate attempt at grabbing answers. Just as she left her door, she bumped into Lumi and Autumn. They could immediately see the confusing, undirected rage through her saffron eyes, which now sported a darker glint.

“What is this?”

She opened the book to the page, looking at them demanding. Autumn was the first to talk, with panic on the front of her voice.

“It wasn’t us, I swear!”

"Now, calm down Autumn."

Yasmin turned her sights to Lumi.

"I didn't write it either! And even still..."

She examined the quote more carefully.

"Why would I write something like that? Why would any of us do that, come to think of it?"

Yasmin lowered her guard, slumping onto the floor with her head towards the floor.

"The point of that diary is to keep my inner thoughts a secret."

"Then you should hide it somewhere a bit harder to find."

"That's not it. Why would anyone have any business with what I write in there?"

Lumi folded her arms, looking to the distance.

"If anything, I'd say the red writing and the letter were connected. Which is why I came up with an idea."

"And how do I know none of you wrote the letter?"

Lumi put her hand on Yasmin's shoulder, trying to reassure her with a smile.

"I know there's a lot of unknowns around you right now, and that you're finding it hard to trust anyone, but we look out for one another here. We're all a team, there's a reason we're all cooped up together like this."

Yasmin looked back up, sighing.

"Okay... so what's your idea?"

Lumi looked at Autumn, to which they both looked back.

"Autumn, you and Gamma will take Yasmin to Mach's HQ or factory or whatever the hell he's calling it now."

"Um, who is that?"

"The boss of the place the letter was sent from. I'm guessing he was the one who sent it."

Autumn perked up with startled eyes as if she'd just noticed something.

"Wait, did you just say we're taking Yasmin outside?!"

"Yes, now calm down, it's really not a big deal, she's been outside here before and she's not useless, you know. I'm sure she can fend for herself."

Yasmin felt an uncomfortable pit in her gut, clearing her throat to get them to stop talking. With magic in the equation, it makes sense that she might not stand much of a

chance, but how helpless did they think she was? She was disheartened to not be met with an awkward courteousness from Lumi, but complete indifference.

“Starlet didn’t teach you anything about Arcanum, did she?”

Yasmin shook her head slowly, immediately feeling defeated. A harsh combination of truth and helplessness.

“You’re going to need training. In order to integrate you into this society, there’s a lot to be done.”

“Is this Mach guy one of those things.”

“Nope. I just want you to see the world for yourself.”

Yasmin looked at her confused. It brought back the questions from earlier, but with less of the aggression.

“Are you sure none of you set this up?”

Lumi laughed slightly. It felt out of character almost, to which end Yasmin noticed how expressionless she is.

“I assure you, none of us had a part to play in it. I trust the rest of the members here and it’s like Autumn said; none of us have anything to gain from that. But let’s just say it was pretty fortunate timing. Starlet’s not actually quite done with you yet.”

“But she said—”

“Forget that. She has a gift for you, and she’s going to be here in about an hour to take you.”

A gift? This is intriguing, and after the wistfulness of parting with the one who brought her here in the first place, too. She couldn’t think of anything to say, but was rather more focused on the excitement of the gift instead.

“You can just stay put for now though. Got a busy day today.”

Autumn sat down alongside Yasmin, sidling up to her with enthusiasm. Her expectant smile broke the gaze between her and the book.

“So, what are you gonna do?”

Yasmin slumped backwards, hitting her head on the wall behind her. She lie there a few seconds before sitting back up. Looking at the many doors of which she didn’t know what the obstructed, she looked back at Autumn.

“I think I want to explore some more.”

“Yeah?”

She looked around curiously, then standing up.

“How about we go see what Julie’s doing?”



“You go on ahead; I’m just gonna sit here awhile.”

“What? No!”

Autumn looked at her pleadingly, torn between begging eyes and petulant pouting.

“You’ve barely been here! You should be wanting adventure! Exploring! Don’t tell me now that you aren’t curious of the world around us.”

“I suppose you strike me as the kinda person to find fascination in the smallest of things.”

“Of course! But why aren’t you?”

“Maybe I’m just tired.”

Autumn’s eyes wore down her resistance. With a sad smile trying to understand her like that, she must know of that persuasive demeanour she’s got. Yasmin stood back up, struggling to mirror her enthusiasm.

Going through the same rooms, there were a few more people around and Julie was still in the sparring room in spite of no-one else being present there.

“Hey!”

The high pitch of her voice was defied by the stable confidence she exuded.

The pair turned to see Julie sporting a confident and almost sinister smile.

“So, any of you come here to fight?”

“Um, no, not really.”

Julie looked at them with a disappointed expression, to which Yasmin decided to shield herself with an excuse.

“I would, but I don’t do magic or anything so it wouldn’t exactly be fair.”

“Ooooh!”

Julie turned her gaze to Yasmin, with a curious and curiously hard to read expression, made more fearful by her almost crazed smirk.

“So you think I’m just a puppet of my magic, do you?”

“What? I never said that.”

Julie pulled a small metallic stick from her right pocket, tossing it behind her to hear a softened punch as it hit the wall. She then crouched slightly, with her hind leg stretched out far behind her, intent and well-defined. Yasmin could tell immediately this is something she’s passionate about. She gave in and decided to humour her, maybe it’ll be helpful to learn a new style of combat. She tried to mimic her pose, failing to reflect the confidence in Julie’s intense stare.

"Guess I might as well."

Autumn opened her mouth as if to say something, then stepped back following Yasmin's firm and (mostly) unafraid expression. Julie was the first then to speak, noticing her fear.

"I'll let you take the first hit."

What kind of hit was she talking about exactly? Just a normal punch? Was there a limit to what she could do physically? To prevent the silence from dragging on too long, she swallowed all her pride and fear, threw her hand towards Julie's side. Discipline fell short just before the hit, ultimately resulting in not much of a hit at all. She didn't even bother blocking it, took it like a friendly tap. She looked back at Yasmin with almost a sad look.

"You can surely do better? You came from a world without magic, so you'd have to rely on your body to do all the work for you."

She took a step or two closer. She was about 3 inches taller, but the fearsome look in her eyes made those 3 inches seem so much more.

"I know you're in there. And if you won't let your demon out to play, I'll have to find it myself."

Yasmin could barely open her mouth to ask what that was supposed to mean before a blunt yet incredibly sharp pain tore through her chest, losing her footing immediately as she was knocked back into the padding behind her. She heard Julie land back on the ground, quite unlike Yasmin who looked down, trying to make sense of what just happened.

"Julie!"

Autumn looked afraid, kneeling down next to Yasmin slowly turning to an embrace. Yasmin staggered up slowly, in spite of Autumn's gentle pull back down. Julie smiled, perhaps more genuinely this time. Yasmin looked back in anger, waiting for an explanation or some extra kind of tell before she stood back in the fray.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Yasmin. There are no rules. And if you can't learn to embrace your inner demon, You won't make it very far. Isn't that right, Autumn?"

Yasmin looked back to Autumn questioningly, to which she blushed, avoiding eye contact. She started her reply, speaking timidly.

"Yeah... that's it."

A voice interrupted from outside the room.

"I wish you wouldn't teach her such things."

Lumi appeared in the doorway, eyes carefully placed on Julie. More so once she saw Yasmin, while standing, not completely straight with a very slight stagger.

"You're all behaving, yes?"

"I'm training her to think the way she should."

"Oh, you mean shoot first, land a dozen extra bullets, light in on fire then ask questions later?"

A retort was caught in Julie's throat, instead settling to look annoyed.

"I don't see you doing any teaching? Some executive, right?"

"It's always about violence with you. And that's not how you should think. If you must know, Starlet is coming over to help her with all of that."

"Hey! We don't need to waste their time! I can do that myself. There's a lot she can learn from me."

"Yeah, like how to be your next personal punching bag."

Yasmin perked up at this, where suddenly the weakness she felt amped up a spark in her.

"Hey! I don't think you're giving me enough credit. I guess if I have to learn how to fight, this isn't such a big deal, right?"

"You don't know what you're getting into with her."

"Yeah. Uh, Julie, wouldn't hurt to go a little easier, you know."

She responded with an apathetic laugh, folding her arms.

"You think a stray wolf will go easy on you? Or maybe a Plasmiron?"

Lumi darted back, with bluntness and a level of calm in her voice that shot Julie down:

"Wolves don't live anywhere near here. Plasmirons have a non-violent agreement. They don't attack what doesn't attack them first."

"Ugh, you know what I mean, though."

"You just want to fight someone new. Maybe someone you can't tap into the power of?"

She looked at Julie with a smug smile, who returned the favour with an excited one, looking back at Yasmin.

"She's got no magic energy for me to tap into. That's interesting."

Just as Yasmin was about to ask what they meant by tapping, it was as if Lumi read her completely.

"She has the ability to tap into the power of others briefly with that rod she has..."

Trying to locate it, she lowered her eyes upon seeing it discarded in the far corner of the room. Finding her train of thought again, she continued.

"It requires the opponent to have magic energy, which I suppose you don't have. So it's virtually useless in a fight against you. Which is why if you practice up on your combat skills you can essentially best her in combat!"

Upon that, the rod slammed into the opposite wall, pivoting both Yasmin and Lumi who were right near it. They looked back to Julie, who made no effort to hide that she threw it.

“Not completely useless.”

Julie said with a grin, unfaltering even when faced with Lumi’s cold stare. With a heavy sigh, Lumi broke the tremulous exchange, opting to march out the room unhurt.

“Come on, guys.”

She was followed out by Autumn and Yasmin, whose small talk quickly lifted the atmosphere. Maybe more tension than Yasmin would have liked, but it was quickly becoming a scenario where she’d have to be open-minded to any trauma that happens. What if Julie was right, or if Lumi was just trying to shield her from the real world in some effort to protect?

As they continued towards the entrance, not a second thought on where they were going, Autumn grinded to a sudden halt, presumably on account of the person by the front door. It was a short girl, with a strange perfection exuding from her. She looked perfectly symmetrical, flawless, almost in a way that felt uncannily unreal, made sickeningly so by the innocent smile. She wore an elegant dress of white, coated in intricate patterns of rainbow and a spectrum leading down her dress, along with a dark bow that flashed multiple colours, almost in an illusionary sense.

Autumn looked back at Yasmin, with a pleading and sympathetic look in her eyes.

“Sorry Yasmin, I’ve gotta go now. But I’ll see you after you come back from Starlet, yeah? Good luck!”

If the jarringly short and sudden disingenuousness didn’t give herself away, the sudden movement into a sprint outside the door then out of her sight definitely did. She looked back, realised she finally got some alone time where she didn’t feel the need to please. Her first idea was to write more in her diary, but eventually decided on exploration, as Autumn had previously suggested. Her words may deliberately have been misconstrued though. The idea of visiting rooms she had no permission on or even any clarification on the status of didn’t seem so momentary anymore. She threw a quick glance at the stairs leading to the staff area she was told about on her first day, but quickly shrunk back reading the sign, now noticing a door on the stairs designed differently to the others, a very dark grey which exuded an intimidating formality.

Instead, Yasmin moved through the hallway; her fear already cut her off of the upper floors, but maybe there’s a few dozen other areas she can still explore. The building was really monumental, almost pretentiously so. A place so grand must have secrets. Well, what better way to spend the forty or so minutes before Starlet is due to arrive?

She continued back to the ring room when she found her curiosity drop like an anchor. The airiness of the dark ring room – the room that she still hasn’t seen in anything other than a dismal, abandoning darkness – its intrigue proved too much for Yasmin, who was

drawn in like a fly, though with the extra similarity that she didn't have anything else in her life right now.

She slipped into the ring, which she noted for having the same padding as the sparring room although, maybe less padded. From here, her surroundings once swallowed in blacks and dark greys were more clear, revealing a number of doors and other equipment essentially alien to her. She left the ring, headed for the closest door to her, which seemed to be just a cupboard, an empty one at that, save for a mop. She tried the next door closest, which felt somewhat more metallic, with a rectangular silhouette at the height at about Yasmin's head.

The door was more flexible and easy than she anticipated, almost losing her footing upon the door swinging open. The room itself was creepily empty, aside from a couple desks and drawers. By the looks of it, the room wasn't in use, but could make for a good hideout. Upon immediately running out of notable... anything, she left the room, trying a different door. The far right was a fairly large studio, generously giving more light than the others on the account of a number of windows. It was more of an actual room than the others, so maybe more exploration is in order. Stepping further in, Yasmin was met with an unruly array of shelves, books, files and the like, not all of them where they should be, either. A number of tables were scattered around, following a fashion as sporadic as the rest of the various items in the room. It was hard to determine what this room was actually for. Was it an office? Whatever it was, it served to prove no-one seems to use the ring, since no-one has bothered to clean this room. It almost felt tempting to sort some of this out, or at least do so to a level that didn't look more like a biohazard.

Her trance was defeated just then upon spotting a pile of white clothes on a table at the back of the room. Approaching them, she could see they were small but, more importantly, they were fresh, she could even sense that from a distance. It conflicted with the idea of no-one using the room. And, come to think of it, there was definitely noise suitable for a person to have been here yesterday.

She examined more closely, navigating the stationery scattered across the desks. There were papers lying around, but what exactly they entailed not so easy to decipher. One caught her eye, sorted into a table with a plethora of numbers. She groped around for more paper, finding a piece with a more formal style.

Based on what she could make of it, it was a report, dictating a number of procedures. It highlighted an incident, a Haloite which caused a minor epidemic near the ring. She wasn't sure what a Haloite was, presumably something native to this world. Reading further down, the security of this area has apparently been inadequate for a while, having let in a Haloite which looked reportedly to be ages about 10 to 15. She was about to put it down when a lower paragraph caught her eye, then picking the paper out from the stash and holding it under the light she could manage from the window. The epidemic caused the death of a member in this very building, to which end a case seemed to have been brought up.

Maybe the place wasn't all that perfect? It shouldn't be a surprise, but such a lack of safety blatantly put on the desk didn't seem right. When was this written? It can't have

been too long ago if it was placed just here. In the confusion, Yasmin dropped the paper to the ground, which fluttered halfway under a table. As she dropped to pick it up, she noticed a tray placed under there, stacked against the wall. She tapped it, in some futile and curious attempt to move it. Her heart skipped a beat as it fell to the ground, the loud thud standing tall over the already disquieting ambience. When she came to again, a hole was in its place. About big enough to fit through, if only barely. That immediate thought felt suspicious, as she felt through the hole and decided suddenly to see if it meant anything.

Moving the tray out of the way, its frictional screech almost begged her away from the hole, but she pressed onward, barely squeezing through. Whatever was back here, it was almost entirely black, an unnatural darkness that convinced her of a terrible secret ready to pounce. It didn't help that the area was barely generous enough to give her breathing room, her body scraping every so often against the wall. This area went further than expected, able to continue the awkward push through for at least a dozen more steps, before a light became apparent. It beckoned her forward, more because of her sudden desperation to be able to see again, coupled with relief as the light got stronger.

As she scraped past, the wall suddenly ended and she was met with a very tiny room with a white, almost nostalgically traditional setup, a small light easing her mind with a humble sooth from its natural yellow-white hue. From the other side, slight movements could be heard. Her ease was short-lived, looking back to some illusion, the juxtaposition of light and black making it look like the room floated in an endless void. Somehow, it beckons her back, warning her of the unnatural light. Now she really felt like she shouldn't be here. Could the others be looking for her? Maybe Starlet was already here? She felt ready to go back when a voice, soft and fair, stopped her in her tracks, a cold force completely absorbing her.

"Who's there?"

"Um.... Yasmin."

Her voiced mirrored the almost reassuring timidity in the other person's voice, made more uncomfortable by the ongoing silence. There was no response. After a long ten seconds, she decided on making the first move. Putting her hand lightly on the handle, she started, shyly.

"I'm coming in now."

The door held back upon being opened, taking an amount of strength to move it. Based on the intense ruffling of the carpet, that was probably the reason why. From what she could see, the room looked equally traditional with a very unsaturated palette. There was a number of sketchbooks, art equipment, books all neatly in a corner, along with some draws and trays that seemed to carry it all neatly. She stepped through, carefully, surrendering to the softness of the carpet which soothed her mind immediately.

Staring back at her was a frail white haired girl, with piercing red eyes that shot a more foreboding malice in spite of their widened and vulnerable expression. The girl sat unmoving, cutting her glance when Yasmin looked back at her. She played timidly with her

hands, a shakiness being sensed, an imbalance apparent in the suddenly cramped room. Yasmin was completely as a dead end. Why there was somebody she hasn't seen before this secluded and difficult to find in the building was beyond her. There were no windows in here, only a vent presumably to let the place be colder. As time passed, the girl settled into her bed, also completely white. The amount of white, alongside her pale appearance gave the impression of a doll. The girl wore a white gown with what looked like a red pyjama top underneath. She looked comfortable, except for the ever-increasing glances Yasmin got from her. In spite of the colder reception she got, she resolved to try and have a conversation anyway, to find out what secret she's stumbled upon.

"So, what're you doing here?"

She immediately regretted the question, reflected in the girl's completely absent response. She tried again.

"Is this your room?"

It took a few further seconds, by she was startled by a slight hum, an affirmative. Yasmin started to give in to the silence, taking note of the many illustrations on the wall. They spoke a thousand words about this girl, but only served to make the situation a thousand times harder to navigate. Most of them seemed dark in nature, more cryptic and symbolic. It felt eerily like home, but in the form of art rather than poetry. They weren't too different, thinking on it now. Maybe that was the common ground she needed.

"Nice pictures. I really like them,"

After another expected pause...

"Thanks."

Her voice was naturally soft, but the timidity was almost too much by this point.

"So, you're a member here? How come I haven't seen you around?"

She looked slightly irritated this time, tightly shutting her eyes before sitting up on her bed. Yasmin could tell she wanted to say something, and suddenly the situation she was faced with was much more clear. It looked like nothing more than shyness.

"I don't come out often."

Her eyes pleaded louder than her mouth could not to ask further, and her prayers were answered when Yasmin finally gave in. Disappointed with her findings, she looked back to the door but walking through, she heard her voice again, more vocal this time, if only slightly. After a few further seconds, Yasmin questioned, realising her hurry.

"Yeah? You need something?"

Playing with her fingers again, she tried to avoid eye contact as she gathered the confidence to speak. After a fumbling stutter, she started.

"I wanted to know... how you found me."

“Oh, that? I—”

She realised that she got her through her own accord. Moreover that she could get in trouble for snooping in areas she should know about. How was she to explain something like that?

“I noticed the tray under the table and that there was a passage there. I was bored, essentially; I had no idea there was a hidden room here.”

“There’s secrets everywhere here...”

Her confidence grinded to an immediate halt, with a slight blush covering her face, then the pillow. She looked totally down for the count, but it was interesting information nonetheless. Yasmin left the room promptly, closing the stubborn door on her way out. A part of her still felt guilty; the air was so much heavier than it needed to be, this coming from someone who just snooped places they probably shouldn’t, too. The way out of the passage was somewhat easier, until going through the hole, which she noticed was at a very awkward angle on the ground and so uncomfortable it gave her the time to wonder how that girl did this every time she came in and out.

As she managed her way out, her elbow hit the tray she moved; a fateful reminder to put it back. She emerged from under the table, leaving the room which was still empty. The brightness seemed more generous than before, likely an aftereffect of the passage being completely devoid of light. As she left the room, she noticed it was more light than usual; some spotlights were on. She came out to see a concerned Gamma. He didn’t seem mad by any means, but not reassuring enough for Yasmin to leave with anything but a timid and ashamed expression. As he walked her out of the room, not a word was exchanged, her mind being elsewhere upon looking back to see the rectangle was in fact a sign. “Authorised Personnel Only”. Why did she feel things weren’t resolved that easy, that it would come back when she least expected it.

After leaving the ring room, her heart skipped another beat to see Starlet in the doorway. Given the way everyone seemed to orderly all of a sudden, it seemed fair to conclude she was some kind of aristocracy. Her eyes fell on Yasmin and suddenly she felt it too.

“I’m sure you were told I’d be taking you today?”

Yasmin nodded sheepishly, noting how weak to everyone she felt today. Did Julie have that much of an impact? She darted to follow Starlet, who quickly walked out of the building.

“So, what kind of things did you need to sort out?”

“Well, today, we did research and learned quite a few things about you.”

Yasmin fell cold, strangely warm all the same from seeing the faces of those around her when they saw Starlet.

“What kind of things?”



“Well...”

She looked down, thoughtfully.

“We learned about your background, for one.”

She then continued without letting Yasmin get a word in, predicting she’d ask.

“You don’t know your full background. You don’t know your family or your surname. It’s details like that that give you no technical presence in that world.”

She remembered this kind of talk from the other day, maybe best to not hear it again.

“Okay, okay. So what are we actually doing?”

“Before anything, we need to sort out that lack of magic of yours.”

Yasmin looked down. The idea of using magic was practically inevitable, but still scary. This kind of change could even be considered the official start.

“Where are we going? Is it far?”

“Be patient. A warrior with no self-control or discipline isn’t a warrior at all.”

“Are you saying I’m going to be a warrior?”

“Whether one on the battlefield or in your mind is your path to take. My job is to clear your mind before you’re properly integrated into this world. We’re going to a sacred ground, you can call it the Ethereal Realm.”

“Sounds... magic, I guess.”

Starlet nodded in agreement, more to the fact that it sounded more boring than anything else.

“Its true nature isn’t very well known, so that’s the name it goes by. You could call it a fountain of humanity. That resonates with you, does it not?”

“You mean because I’m a human?”

“Well, it’s a place of purity, a place of hope. It sounds like they’re things you need to work on.”

“Sounds like you’re describing heaven.”

She laughed slightly, Her attitude seemed more open and amiable today, making Yasmin more comfortable.

“Well, you may know already, everyone has a different idea on what heaven is, on what hope or purity are.”

“That makes sense, but what does that actually mean for the... I’ll call it a realm?”

“Which ideology gets the sacred ground. Which tribe takes over, gains power, rules over others. What one calls a sacred home ends up another battlefield for bloodshed.”

“Ah.”

Yasmin’s breath was short, it sounded a bit too much like home. The idea of empires and war must have been inevitable though. She surely wasn’t naïve to think this dream would magically solve everything. That probably isn’t even possible. It’s nothing new, so nothing to worry about. The mental battlefield is the only one to worry about right now, and it’s doing just fine as long as she lets it. She convinced herself after half a minute or so to find solace in that she was about to finally integrate into society. That hopefully this awkward outcast notion on the back of her mind would disappear for good.

The journey took about 15 minutes before it presumably went to a halt, with Starlet stopping them both in front of a grandiose display of colour. It looked more like a surrealist piece than anything else, until her eyes adjusted and a perfect field came into view. If the building she was at was intimidating, this field was in its own league. The field stretched a radial wave of perfection so clean Yasmin’s eyes could barely comprehend its majesty. The hills were all notably connected, united by a single valley in the middle, exuding an unnatural and yet comforting light. This had to be it. In the midst of the aurora stood a number of shadowed silhouettes, some of which had eyes that reflecting even seeping through the light.

“This is the place, Yasmin. You made it this far. Are you ready?”

Her voices pleaded a silent yes. There weren’t any valid words for the place she was in; all words felt transient and docile to the mysticism before her. It felt too much, like a poetic nirvana that she wished she’d never see, so she could keep her faith alive herself. She timidly replied.

“Ready.. for what?”

There was that smile again, the one that made it look like she relished her fear, yet prompted her to take risks and live life. It was as if she could read her expressions, or more like Starlet was leading her.

“To begin your new life. To finally make your first contact with the force that brought us together.”

She walked down the hill, a confident stride that reassured Yasmin of her safety. Her new life would begin here.

“The light.”

With those words, the pair disappeared into the aurora, then followed by their silhouettes, all under the light that would create and destroy life.

## Chapter 3

### The Arcanum of New Life